

Reinterpreting the Canon: Indian Women's Writings in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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Abstract: *This article showcases a careful selection of feminist writings from India, spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Each of these works serves as a creative platform to question and challenge deeply entrenched norms for women within the Subcontinent. By revisiting these narratives along with new trends in historiography, the article aims to integrate these hitherto overlooked stories into the broader literary conversation, emphasizing their relevance and significant impact on both literature and gender discourse in contemporary India.*

Keywords: Feminism, Literature, Gender, Norms, Women, India

With the onset of the twentieth century, women's writings in India emerged as a significant component of the national literary and cultural landscape. However, a critical and ongoing re-examination of the current canon through an inclusive historiographical lens is vital to uncover themes that have been overshadowed by the dominant influence of mainstream literary trends. The debate over what qualifies as important or worthy of categorization has often prevented a deeper understanding of feminist writings. Catering largely to male audiences, women's literature has frequently been reduced to reflections on personal, socio-economic, and political struggles, overshadowing the psychological depth that is intrinsic to these cathartic narratives, relegating several important voices to the periphery.

These narratives authored by women, based on their lives in the Subcontinent, encompass a diverse array of experiences. Women's literature in India navigates the dynamic interactions between societal expectations and individual fulfilment, presenting a poignant portrayal of the struggle for personal freedom. Literature, being their creative medium of choice, offers these women a platform to delve into issues involving identity, agency, and empowerment. It is imperative that their contributions receive heightened recognition within the broader discourse of literature.

The article is organized into three sections, with a focus on amplifying the overshadowed voices of Indian women. These personal narratives and fictional work confront the multifaceted aspects of colonization that these women faced, both within their homes and in the societal sphere, during the twentieth-century and post-independence era. By re-examining this history through a more nuanced approach, the article aims to move beyond simplistic categorizations and shed light on newer themes through which these writings should be interpreted. The article showcases contemporary discourse around traditional and modern values pertaining to twenty-first-century women alongside the newer challenges that now confronted them. On analyzing these emerging trends and re-assessing past experiences, the article attempts to gain deeper insights into these writings which constitute valuable women-centric reflections and bring forth their importance in advancing both individual and collective empowerment for women across India today.

Tracing Literary Trends: Insights into 'Her' Domesticity

A discernible undertone to twentieth-century texts is women's psychology and its layered complexities. These texts shed light on the profound impact of diverse experiences shared by women while providing invaluable insights into the socio-cultural and personal changes that moulded these shared experiences during this critical period in history.

Kanakalata Chaliha,¹ an influential Assamese poet, dealt with women's issues centring on female identity and societal transformation. Her works left a significant imprint on Assamese literature alongside Kamalalaya Kakati.² Together, they published Assam's first women's magazine, *Ghar Jeuti*,³ launched in 1928. This marked a crucial juncture in feminist free-thinking within Assamese history. The magazine was edited by Chandraprava Saikiani,⁴ a leading advocate for women's rights and education in Assam (founder-Assam Pradeshi Mahila Samiti).⁵ Under her editorship, the magazine became a forerunner for women's issues. *Ghar Jeuti* featured a variety of articles on rights, education, health, and personal hygiene, alongside literary pieces that shed light on the daily lives of women. Celebrated within the Assamese culture for its progressive ideas about women's independence and equality, the magazine played a key role in shaping the regional feminist movement in colonial India.

This period also witnessed significant contributions from several Marathi female writers from Maharashtra. Their creative expression was primarily manifested through poetry and short stories, within the fictional genre. Among them were regionally recognized authors, like Padma Gole,⁶ who exhibited a passion for literature from a young age. Despite her largely informal education, Gole's fervour for writing was deeply influenced by the socio-cultural milieu of early twentieth-century Maharashtra. Her work, such as *Swapnata*⁷ encapsulated the emotional essence of a woman's life, exploring themes of love, separation, longing, and struggle. Indira Sant,⁸ a celebrated writer in Marathi literature

today, was a pioneer in shaping modern Marathi poetry. Her literary technique employed natural imagery as a metaphor for emotional and philosophical exploration. Some of her notable works include *Household Fires*⁹ and *KANAV*,¹⁰ both providing an introspective view into the female experience within a patriarchal society. In contrast to the aforementioned Brahmin writers, women from lower socio-economic groups have also been major contributors to the literary canon of India. Shanta Shelke¹¹ hailed from a community of lower-caste weavers. She completed her education in Pune, obtaining degrees in both Marathi and Sanskrit. Her legacy showcases a diverse body of work, embodying a simplistic style yet delivering emotional depth, evidenced by her highly acclaimed anthology named *Anolakha*.¹²

Similar themes have been explored by fiction writers, namely Kusumavati Deshpande,¹³ Geeta Sane,¹⁴ and Vibhavari Shirurkar,¹⁵ popular by her pen name Malatibai Bedekar. Known for their radicalism, their works presented readers with poignant themes by challenging earlier traditional feminist writings. While initially faced with scepticism, Vibhavari's works were eventually given due recognition for the display of audacious themes by a female author. Her stories, like *Shabri*¹⁶ that encapsulated the lives of women shackled by the vicissitudes of matrimony and tackled complexities within familial relationships, were ahead of their time. The period of the early 1920s, therefore, yields unique insights and sensitive depictions of the personal lives of female individuals. They comprise works that were essential to modernizing Marathi poetry and have left a lasting legacy within Indian literature.

Simultaneously, a formidable section of women writers flourished in the states of southern India. Comprising women from every strata of India's caste-based hierarchy, their literary contributions left an indelible mark on the cultural and intellectual landscape of the region. Some remarkable works of the southern region come from the ambit of Tamil literature. Vai. Mu. Kodainayaki Ammal,¹⁷ one of the popular novelists embodying a strong nationalist zeal, started a printing press of her own named *Jagan Mohini*.¹⁸ She also edited a magazine with the same name in 1921. Tattam Ranganayaki,¹⁹ another novelist, translated Rabindranath's Bengali novel *Yogayog* and also wrote a novel *Diwan Makal*.²⁰ As the story was based on the marital relationship between a non-Brahmin boy and a Brahmin girl, 'This work was not accepted by any publisher for a long time: it was first serialised in the radical magazine Manikkodi and appeared in book form in 1946'.²¹

Corresponding to the North Indian literary trend in short stories, Karnataka saw a rise of similar literary works. Kannada writer Kodagina Gowramma/Gouramma²² contributed to this trend with her work titled *Punarvivaha*²³ (a more recently translated work in English by Deepa Bhashti *Fate's Game and Other Stories*²⁴ which covers 21 stories written by Gowramma). This work sees a realistic portrayal of characters, emphasizing the complexities of societal norms and personal struggles. On the other hand, Shyamala Belgaonkar's²⁵

literature sees a sympathetic and meticulous depiction of working-class women. Her stories provide genuine narratives of gender discrimination and women's quests to live a respectable life.

Anasuya Shankar,²⁶ popularized under the pen-name *Triveni*, began the trend that transformed fiction to address real-time gender issues. She garnered immense popularity as one of the preeminent short story writers of her time. Anupama Niranjana²⁷ was an eminent contemporary writer and also a non-Brahmin physician who has contributed to various literary genres. *Tayi Magu*,²⁸ written in Kannada, is one of her notable works which serves as a comprehensive handbook on maternity and child care. Here, she offered a thorough examination of the relevant challenges faced by contemporary women. She, alongside her literary peers, intricately explores the physical and mental hardships encountered by women in twentieth-century India.

Shifts in Feminist Historiography: Voicing Unheard Themes in the Domestic Realm

With the onset of independence, India experienced a global interaction among feminist networks. Thereby inducing a shift in traditional feminist historiography and the creation of a new transitional feminist historiography. Existing frameworks collaborated with these new trends in feminist historiography resulting in fresh insights and newer takes on feminist issues. Therefore, leading to a more nuanced and complex understanding of women's roles and experiences in contemporary Indian society.

A significant intrinsic intervention within earlier feminist historiography was the inclusion of oral history as a legitimate historical source. Uma Chakravarti's works exemplify the adoption of this new approach. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*²⁹ and *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*,³⁰ incorporated oral testimonies, thus allowing her to present personal narratives of women that illuminated their agency and hardships in ways that traditional archival sources could not. The oral tradition also aided the addition of more regional writers and their incorporation into the unconventional source base, contributing to a newer and more effective methodological approach.

Scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita also played a crucial role through their seminal collection of translations in the volumes *Women Writing in India, Volume 1*³¹ and *Women Writing in India, Volume 2*.³² Both works, including personal writings and folklore, compiled a wide range of writings by women in the regional languages of Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, and Bengali. Thereby, expanding the scope of feminist historiography. Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar made further significant contributions like *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*.³³ Their scholarship explored themes of social reform, depicting women as both agents and recipients of change. By revisiting nineteenth and twentieth-century social reform movements, they highlight female engagement in issues like widow remarriage, education, and caste

abolition, highlighting how they navigated complex power dynamics within their communities and families.

This new transitional feminism, which emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century, also addressed global inequalities, intersectionality, and cross-border solidarities, emphasizing issues like caste, class, and colonialism. These newer factors were incorporated within the Indian context by confronting local gender inequalities and exploring the impact of colonialism, later postcolonial shifts, and ultimately globalization, on Indian women.

The British colonization of India introduced Western gender norms and legal frameworks that often clashed with Indian cultural and societal structures, profoundly affecting women. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*³⁴ (article) and *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*³⁵ (book), by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, critique the predicaments of women in postcolonial countries. Mohanty argued that Western feminists often painted non-Western women as universally oppressed, erasing the complexities of their lived realities.

After the first United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975, Indian feminists became active participants in such discussions, bringing attention to challenges specific to Indian women. Issues of caste discrimination, dowry deaths, female infanticide, and gender-based violence were brought to the forefront in the 1970s and 1980s, by organizations like the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA).³⁶ Additionally, they received academic attention under journals, such as *Manushi: A Journal About Women and Society*³⁷ by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, which resonated with global feminist movements focusing on domestic violence, sex-related abortion, rape etc. Kamla Bhasin, one of India's leading feminist activists, was instrumental in building global and regional feminist networks. She coordinated on *One Billion Rising*,³⁸ a global movement and a founding member of *Sangat-1998*.³⁹ Bhasin, therefore, made a prominent contribution to the cause by extending the reach of this movement by way of developing a global feminist network across South Asia. Fostering solidarity among feminist networks throughout the region, instrumental in raising awareness about critical issues of gender-based violence, economic inequality, and women's rights.

The Twenty-first Century: Revisiting & Re-evaluating Earlier Gender Perspectives

The twenty-first century saw a significant re-evaluation of past themes covered previously by women writers. The period also witnessed a reclaiming of women's narratives, now explored increasingly through the lens of intersectionality.⁴⁰ Postcolonial writings within the Indian framework explored how race,⁴¹ caste and ethnicity intersected with gender to historically shape women's experiences within the Indian context. The focus, therefore, shifted to categories of caste, class and community. Scholars like Sharmila Rege, (who

authored *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*,⁴² and Urmila Pawar, who wrote *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*,⁴³ drew attention to struggles unique to Dalit women. Scholars also highlighted the history of various tribal⁴⁴ communities within literary works. Nandini Sundar applied her analysis through intersectional inclusivity in *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar*.⁴⁵ She showcased the impact of state and insurgent violence on tribal communities in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. While the work does not focus exclusively on women, it exposes the hardships faced specifically by tribal women amid conflict and displacement.

Parallel to these developments was the increasing emphasis on environmental issues. Popularised during the 1980s and 1990s, ecofeminism⁴⁶ was the first to illustrate the dual exploitation of women and the environment through Western capitalist development in postcolonial countries. Ecofeminism bears connections to the tribal framework since environmental degradation was linked to the exploitation of tribal women in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Here, Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*⁴⁷ has focused on various such aspects within tribal communities in India. She offers a feminist perspective on environmental resource management, the effect of government policies on the environment, and its impact on women in their routine functioning. Ecofeminism, therefore, has been detrimental to attaining an understanding on intersections between gender, caste, and environmental concerns.

The larger goal of these aforementioned scholars was the reappraisal of Indian feminist literature so as to incorporate alternative views on the shared experiences of women to achieve greater inclusivity. The key methodology to outline these fresh perspectives is through the process of revisiting and re-evaluating previous narratives. This calls for the recentring of historical inquiry around a women-centric view. The process of critically reassessing historical narratives and reasserting the contributions of women, who are unaccounted for in traditional accounts, pioneered concepts exclusive to women. Such processes are displayed in literary endeavours by authors like Mahadevi Verma (author to *Ateet Ke Chalchitra*,⁴⁸ *Path Ke Saathi*,⁴⁹ etc.), whose writings rose to popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, her works still influence scholars who have dedicated their work to themes relating to women's experiences with other women, the unseen chains of perception and conception relating to tradition and motherhood.

On a similar line, the first quarter of the twenty-first century saw a series of works encapsulating themes of motherhood. They documented the identity and experiences of mothers as seen in works like *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment*²⁵⁰ edited by Maithreyi Krishnaraj. This work was based on the socio-anthropological approach, examines maternity by inspecting lived experiences of motherhood and ideologies innate to nationalist and religious debate. Her essay divulges the idealistic portrayal of motherhood and the

paucity of financial means among Indian mothers. Indrani Karmakar's *Maternal Fictions: Writing the Mother in Indian Women's Fiction*⁵¹ analyses the questioning of traditional gender roles by women authors in India and their interpretations of motherhood. While Geetanjali Singh Chanda, in *Mapping Motherhood: The Fiction of Anita Desai*⁵² explores motherhood through her assessment of Anita Desai's novels where the focus lies on psychological and emotional complexities faced by her female characters. Other thematic texts include *A Space of Her Own*⁵³ edited by Leela Gulati and Jasodhara Bagchi and *Janani-mothers, daughters, motherhood*⁵⁴ edited by Rinki Bhattacharya. They deliver a collection of writing and autobiographical accounts from contemporary authors, thinkers, filmmakers, and activists, reflecting on their own experiences of motherhood or otherwise. The two anthologies ignite a dynamic dialogue within Indian scholarship, emphasizing solidarity between mothers and childfree women. The authors advocated for a liberating view of motherhood and womanhood, questioning conventional narratives while embracing the multiplicity and variance in the experiences of women.

This ongoing exchange in dialogue has, therefore, drawn greater attention to women's issues, challenges, and achievements, particularly with the advent of the Internet. Herein, digital platforms become a key point of focus. They facilitated connections among scholars, bridging gaps in the feminist discourse. This in turn led to increased academic research and a deeper understanding of the contemporary scenario confronting Indian women in post-Independent India. Feminist historiography thus gained momentum, enabled by Digital Feminism⁵⁵ to empower women in reclaiming their own narratives, documenting their histories, and amplifying them in ways that were hitherto unprecedented. In the Indian context, digital platforms and archives have become indispensable, in today's time, for reclaiming and preserving overlooked issues. Twenty-first century Digital Feminism, therefore, transformed traditional archives, simultaneously capturing women's contributions through unconventional sources like art, literature, and political activism.

Prominent digital storehouses included Zubaan Books Archive⁵⁶ (based in Delhi since 2004), a feminist publishing house and digital archive that focuses on the works of women from South Asia. Through their Poster Women project,⁵⁷ Zubaan has formulated an online collection of posters created by Indian women across various feminist movements, campaigns for women's rights, and protests against violence and inequality, presenting to its citizens a visual history of women's activism. Such initiatives offer unique insights into how feminist movements have evolved in India with the use of unconventional sources. Another example is that of the Indian Memory Project⁵⁸ (Founded in February 2010 by Indian photographer Anusha Yadav). Though not exclusively feminist, the project has made a substantial contribution to preserving women's history. Their basic functioning is based on collecting and sharing personal stories, memories and photographs of Indians from all different regions and

communities. Their narratives often highlight women's roles in freedom movements, the Partition, and inclusions of everyday life, offering a layered and nuanced understanding of women's experiences throughout Indian history.

Pre-existing feminist literature in various regional languages, often neglected in mainstream historiography, is now also available on digital platforms such as SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).⁵⁹ This is a digital archive on a mission to recover and disseminate women-centric works. Founded by feminist scholars (C. S. Lakshmi, Maithreyi Krishna Raj and Jyoti Randive), SPARROW collects and digitizes texts, interviews, and oral histories that document the lives and works of Indian women writers, activists, and artists. Additionally, The Queer Feminist Digital Archive, maintained by organizations like Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group,⁶⁰ focuses on archiving the experiences of queer women and non-binary people in India. Play a crucial role in documenting the contributions of queer feminist activists, artists, and writers of marginalised communities, who have been at the forefront of challenging heteronormative and patriarchal structures within contemporary India.

While newly emergent digital spaces have significantly advanced the Indian literary diaspora by highlighting intersectional issues, the challenge of a digital divide restricts access for rural women and those with an unfavourable socio-economic reach. Nonetheless, global networking is gradually bridging this divide, enabling Indian women and feminists alike to connect and collaborate with international audiences. Movements like #MeToo,⁶¹ originating in the West, found resonance among Indian women. Thus, allowing for legal reforms and heightened awareness across the country. Nonetheless, as these digital platforms evolve, there is a pressing need to further develop feminist discourses in India to tackle emerging challenges such as cyber harassment, online misogyny, and the digital surveillance of activism. An intricate understanding of caste, religion, and regional disparities is essential for inclusivity in feminist dialogues, and integrating issues like LGBTQ+ rights, environmental justice, and economic inequalities into feminist frameworks is crucial to forming holistic solutions.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, women's issues in historical discourse have been complex and subject to constant debate. After Independence, the acknowledged body of literature, that shaped Indian literary historiography, constructed a community that overlooked the fundamental question of why problems occurred and the root cause of their creation. The cultural and political forces shaping narratives of feminist writings have often failed to fully reflect their lived experiences as both women and colonized individuals. Furthermore, the assumption that Indian literature must conform to earlier colonial standards,

consistently overlooked women as writers, and readers, a tendency that also seeps into their portrayal in literary works.

The overlooked social, historical, and ideological context and an oversimplified approach, replaced by later trends in intersectionality, limited a holistic understanding of the complexities within women's literature in India. Furthermore, the tendency to categorize feminism into binary divisions, such as Western versus Indigenous or radical versus traditional, obscures the experiences of women who navigated through multiple intersecting identities. Such earlier western-conformist categorizations of feminist literature hindered the attainment of the present understanding of women's history.

Today, the internet and global connectivity have greatly transformed feminist historiography in twenty-first century India. Contemporary feminist historians and scholars use these tools to broaden current categories of women's writings to ensure greater inclusivity of experiences, therefore, supplementing existing literary works with newer trends. As India adapts to the modern world and global influences, it is essential to foster a more comprehensive feminist discourse to address multifaceted challenges and ensure that women's voices across all levels of society are heard and empowered. This ongoing exchange between pre-existing and newer historical trends in women's literature has not only improved our understanding of women's historical roles within evolving patriarchal frameworks but has also facilitated a more accurate evaluation of newer challenges that arise with the changing times and technologies.

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